

Chapter 5

The Robert Portner Brewery: The first decade, 1865-1875

German-built and German-conducted breweries were springing up all over the country to supply an ever-growing demand for the light, invigorating drink which the Germans alone seemed able to make so as to suit the American palate.

Christian Heurich, I Watched America Grow

With the end of the Civil War and the withdrawal of most federal troops, Alexandria's economic boom met an inevitably quick end. As demand dried up, "carpetbaggers" and returning natives alike picked up the pieces, some re-establishing old firms and others wondering whether to move on, perhaps to the West. The landscape had changed dramatically, with the army erecting and razing entire blocks of buildings, constructing wharves and fortifications, and wiping out orchards, wood lots and fence lines. The city was filled with formerly enslaved African Americans who had taken refuge and first tasted freedom here behind Union lines. The black population of Alexandria had increased three-fold, with the freed people occupying buildings abandoned by Confederate sympathizers and the army, creating schools, churches and shantytowns in the city and stable farming communities in the countryside. The federal and city governments opened soup kitchens each winter to feed indigent residents, both white and black. Although occupied longer than any other Southern city, Alexandria avoided the violent destruction visited upon so many. Nonetheless, all segments of the population must have felt fear and uncertainty: the native and "carpetbagger" Unionists who had established new lives under the umbrella of federal protection and favoritism; the former slaves and free blacks who were mostly poor, illiterate, under-employed and as yet without a political voice; and the long-time residents who had supported the rebellion only to witness the dawning of a new and, to them, very unpleasant day. The great question which underlay the events of the next decade was how would these groups co-exist and reach a new, postbellum, post-slavery *modus vivendi*?

Of course, none of this was lost on Robert Portner, who, by virtue of his emerging leadership in both the local business and political communities, was in a position of both advantage and vulnerability. He could help shape postwar Alexandria but was also at the mercy of arriving hard times. An immigrant, Republican newcomer, installed on City Council under the aegis of the military government and having acquired on the cheap several properties seized from "rebel" Virginians, it would not be surprising if Portner were regarded with suspicion or hostility by Alexandria natives. Yet he became one of Alexandria's most popular figures through a combination of political acumen, philanthropy, public service, personality, and what we might today call "networking." Eventually he would refashion himself as a true Virginian: eschewing Radical Republican politics; buying a large country estate at Manassas; sending his sons to the University of Virginia and Southern military schools (including the Virginia Military Institute, where Stonewall Jackson had been a professor); and possibly cultivating a story of having been sympathetic to the Southern cause. His company later used the Virginia state seal in its advertising,

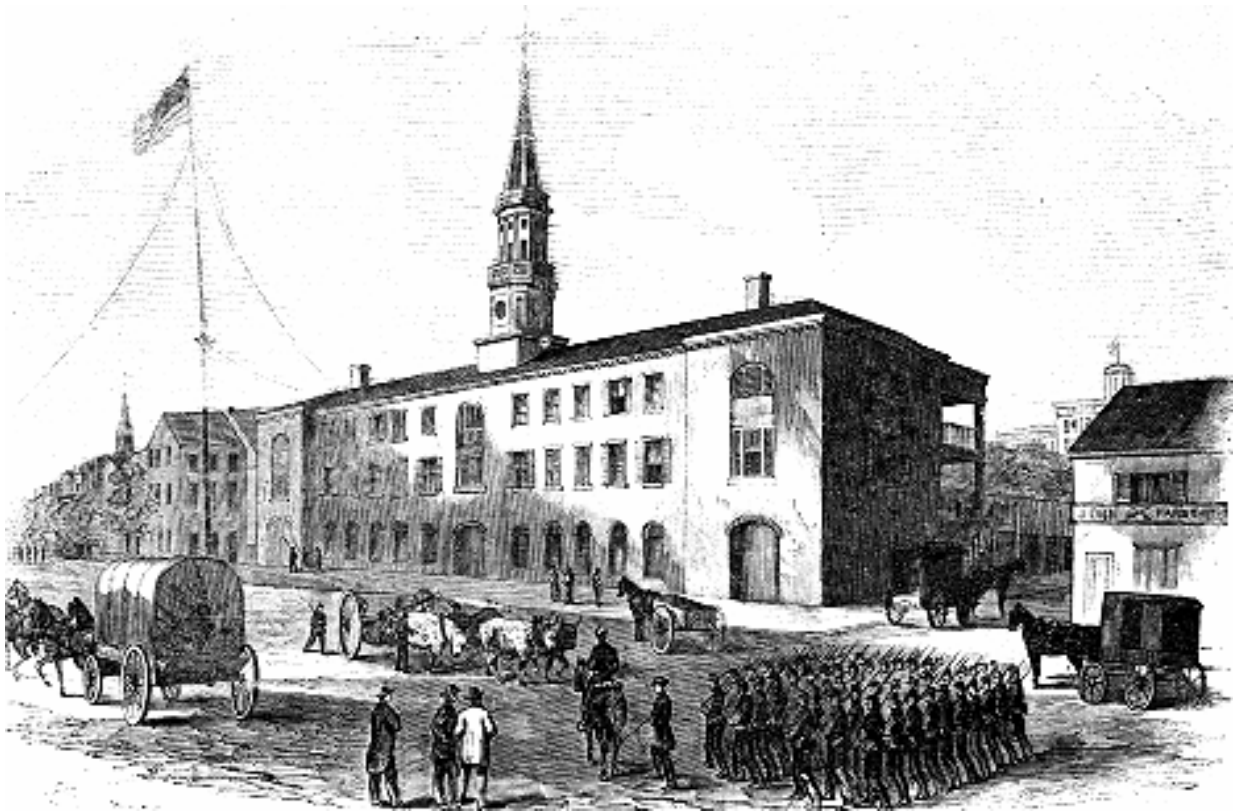
and Portner even made the acquaintance of Jefferson Davis during the 1880s. But ultimately, “nothing succeeds like success,” and Portner would, in time, be most appreciated for helping to buoy the depressed local economy by employing so many. He had already garnered a great deal of goodwill among natives and wartime arrivals through his interventions on behalf of those imprisoned by the military government. His own imprisonment seemed to demonstrate that he was not a Radical Republican, and he had cultivated important friendships among conservative Unionists like Judge Andrew Wylie. Portner managed to be re-elected to Council several times and not just by those who might be expected to be his natural voting base. At times he was supported by Liberals, Conservatives and Radicals alike. (*Alexandria Gazette* May 18, 1872) In his memoirs, he dispenses with discussion of his City Council tenure with this brief account:

As a member of the City Council, I was present at the funeral ceremonies [for President Lincoln] in the Capitol, where I sat in the chair of a Congressman. As representatives of the City of Alexandria, we later on paid our respects to President Johnson. Several times I was elected by the Union party and later by Republicans and, I believe, always rendered good service in the capacity. Later on, I was [not] renominated by the Republicans because I was not radical enough. Thus, for one year [1871-1872], I was not a member of the City Council.¹ The next time I was nominated by the Democrats and later on also by the Republicans, so that I was elected unanimously. I was re-elected several times until I refused to serve any longer. I never [again] joined a party. Although I inclined more to the Republicans, I often voted Democratic. (Portner n.d:12,13)

His words suggest that Robert Portner was a man neither dogmatic nor ideological but willing to change with the times, particularly as Virginia politics grew more conservative and Reconstruction less stringent. If newspaper accounts of Council meetings are representative, he was not very outspoken but undoubtedly active. He voted solidly Republican through at least 1867, but he bristled at being labeled a Radical, especially after garnering only six votes that year, his first postwar campaign and first loss. He referred to himself as a “Liberal, or ‘Greeley’ Republican,” meaning that he was in favor of a magnanimous Reconstruction policy toward the South.² He did support the repeal of harsher criminal punishments for African Americans which, in addition to his hiring practices, suggests a relatively liberal attitude about race, but one short of embracing complete equality. During his first Council term, Portner served on the Committee for the Poor, the

¹ It seems that Portner was a councilman for four terms: 1865-1867 (one two-year term), 1870-1871 and 1872-1874 (two terms), serving initially from the city’s Fourth Ward, then the Third. *The Western Brewer* of June 1880, however, surely based on information supplied by Portner, states that he served seven terms. More likely, it should have read (nearly) seven years. It is worth noting that fellow brewer Henry S. Martin served three terms on Council at about the same time. (Miller 1992:33-37; *Alexandria Gazette* March 7, 1865)

² He was referring, of course, to *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley, the Liberal candidate who ran against President Grant in 1872. Although long an opponent of slavery, Greeley had led a peace movement during the war, favoring permitting the Confederate states to go their own way unmolested. He later supported universal amnesty and suffrage for former Confederates and increasingly criticized the host of newly freed African Americans. He also backed civil service reform, limited government, and free trade. Portner was later an acquaintance of Theodore Roosevelt but also served on the first Presidential inaugural committee for conservative Democrat Grover Cleveland. (Foner 1988:503; Nash et al. 1986:557; *Washington Post* December 20, 1884)



Above: An image of the old Alexandria city hall during the Civil War, from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper.

Left: Postcard image of the "Lafayette" House, purchased by Portner and Recker after being seized by the federal government during the war. Its former owner, Lewis Cazenove, successfully sued for its return in a landmark Supreme Court Case on the grounds that the U.S. government had not the Constitutional authority to impose a penalty of forfeiture for nonpayment of the punitive 1862 direct tax on land (see Portner & Recker v. Cazenove). Congress compensated Portner and Recker for their loss in 1873.

the Committee on Public Property, and the Committee on Streets. The first committee membership is consistent with his pattern of philanthropy; the latter two may have given him some of his first experience with property and construction management, useful later for the expansion of his own factory and in Washington real estate ventures. In May 1878, nearly four years after he left office for the final time, Portner declined a nomination to Council by the local Workingmen party, a faction of mostly African American residents. (Alexandria City Election Results and Ballots 1831-1876; *Alexandria Gazette* March 29, 1865, April 26, 1865, November 29, 1865, March 6, 1867, June 11, 1869, June 12, 1869, June 14, 1869, May 17, 1872 and May 18, 1878; *Washington Post* June 28, 1881; Foner 1988:503)

Politics aside, foremost in Robert Portner's mind after the war was the future of his brewery. It proved plenty to occupy his thoughts and labors. As the Alexandria economy collapsed in late 1865 and early 1866, he found himself saddled with thousands of dollars of debt.

Since it was summer [1865, when the partnership with Recker was dissolved, and]... we already owned some cellars in Washington Street; I also rented the other brewery (Klein's). So, when spring came, I had very much beer to sell: but as the soldiers had left, and were gradually discharged, business became worse. One inn after the other was closed, and beer sales decreased. The beer became worse, partly because it was not brewed well, partly because the cellars became too warm, and partly because we could not sell enough. Times became worse and worse, and soon I was in a grave predicament because I owed much money—\$20,000—for malt, hops, and barrels. A terrible time started for me because within a short time I was no longer able to raise enough money to pay my notes. As one of my creditors refused to extend the time, it was protested and thus my credit was gone. (Portner n.d.:13)



Andrew Russell photograph of the village of West End, on the outskirts of Alexandria, circa 1864. In the background are the Potomac River, the mouth of Great Hunting Creek, and the Union barracks named for General Slough. The black arrow indicates the brewery formerly operated by John Klein, but rented by Robert Portner over the fall and winter of 1865-1866.

By mid 1866, Portner's creditors included New York hops dealers Dutcher & Ellerby (owed perhaps \$4,000), Baltimore maltster Francis Denmead (\$5,050), and Louis Portner, whose \$3,000 was likely a loan used to satisfy other debts. (Alexandria Circuit Court Deed Books W-3:126 and X-3:407; Portner n.d.:13)

How did Portner & Company accrue such debt when its wartime product commanded as much as 60 percent more than beer sold in the immediate pre- and postwar periods? First, with high demands on manpower, shipping, and materials of all kinds, the cost of inputs rose as dramatically as profits. Losses, such as their wagons captured by the Confederate raiders, were uninsured. Rent likely increased as Alexandria was transformed from a ghost town in mid 1861 to an overcrowded supply base by 1863. Entrepreneurs like Portner rolled profits into further capital investment and operating costs, so it was not unusual to leverage the expansion of the business against a great deal of debt to suppliers. At a small scale, the capital costs, distributed over each barrel or bottle produced, were very high. Portner's investment capital was not only in his equipment, but also tied up in the properties that he and Recker had acquired, including the half block on North Washington Street with the newly constructed lager cellars and the house on South Saint Asaph Street, whose former owner was suing to regain title. In 1867 Portner and Recker lost the Saint Asaph Street property in a court judgment, despite the fact that the property was already committed as collateral in other transactions. And Portner's capital investment could not be used to its full capacity; at least as late as 1870, the brewery operated only eight months a year because of the inability to control ambient temperatures. Finally, he was forced to come up with large sums of cash to buy out his former partners in 1864 and 1865. (Virginia District Court of Appeals 1867; United States Census 1870b)

Like most other businesses of the time, Portner's was a proprietorship; it was now the *Robert Portner Brewery*, not yet "company" or "corporation." The firm's indebtedness was not severable from the man's; Portner was liable not only for what he had invested in his business, but to the full extent he could personally pay. In other words, he truly stood to lose all that he owned. His indebtedness exceeded the total assessed value of his real estate holdings, brewing equipment and personal property, even assuming that he could recoup the full value of his assets. For a businessman, the loss of credit would be both a loss of his good name and of the ability to rebound from misfortune. Memories of his father's business failure and the consequent straitened circumstances of his youth undoubtedly preyed upon Robert's thoughts. It is a real measure of his despair that he contemplated walking away from the whole situation. Yet, he had walked away from past ventures, both successes and failures, and had started fresh with nothing.

But great as was his loss and misfortune, equally great was his perseverance and undaunted hope and courage to try again. He was not to be cast down and disheartened even at a second failure; he would try a third time [i.e., after first Portner & Company and then, taking over the brewery on his own], finally believing *still* that "there was money in it." But where was *his* capital to resume operations again? He had none! But he had friends who knew his worth, integrity, and business capacity. It was a venturesome undertaking, but all had the utmost confidence in his judgment, honor and honesty. Friends very readily advanced him

the means to commence life anew again, and start with a fuller and better knowledge of his business and its wants, and the sad experience of... failures. (*The Western Brewer* June 1880:597)

In fact, the brewer's most important friend at this time was the prominent attorney, alderman, and consummate fixer Samuel Ferguson Beach. Beach advised Robert to send a letter to all his creditors, asking them for the extension of further credit, offering everything he owned as collateral.

Every single one, except one, told me to go ahead with my work and pay when I would be able to do so. The largest creditor, F[rancis] Denmead, offered to assist me further if I would give him a deed of trust of everything I owned. He took security for \$12,000. As I owed him \$5,000, there remained \$7,000 worth of malt and hops to work with. Now I made up my mind. After thinking over carefully whether I should give up the business and start something else, I decided to stay in the business where I had lost my money. (Portner n.d.:13)

Portner would have reason to ask twice more for extensions of credit from Denmead, at the end of 1867 and 1868. His collateral included the half block on Washington Street, purchased in 1865, and the leasehold on and equipment of the brewery. The deeds of trust executed at the time therefore give the first glimpse into the equipment being used in the King Street plant and its Washington Street cellars:

One Engine & Boiler, Belting &c, One Washing Machine, One Mash Tub, Two Copper Kettles, One Copper Pump, One Malt Mill and Elevator, Eight Fermenting Tubs, One Reservoir, Three hundred Kegs, One hundred & fifty half barrels, twenty five whole barrels, Twenty casks, Water and Gas Fixtures, Two horses, harness & wagon, One Dray, Beer Cooler, Hose & Spiggots, Desk, six chairs, stove & pipe.

The lager cellars contained 36 large fermenting casks. There is no evidence that these original cellars were in the same location as the vaults dug for Portner's 1868 plant on the same block. In fact, they were likely nearer to Washington Street, possibly associated with one of the two buildings that were standing on the property by 1867. This possibility is supported by the fact that the 1952 excavations for the foundations of a Woodward & Lothrop department store along Washington Street "disclosed beer vaults at the point where the foundations are to be laid."³ (Alexandria Circuit Court Deed Books X-3:513, Y-3:204 and Z-3:58; Alexandria Real and Personal Property Assessments; *Washington Post* March 2, 1952) Archaeological investigations in 1998-1999 did not discover the remains of any structures of the period near Washington Street, however, because of mid-twentieth-century excavation and re-grading (see Chapters 10, 16 and 17).

³ Of course, the article that supplied this information was incorrect in several other particulars. Nonetheless, although building cellars in two locations would have been unnecessarily costly, there is no reason to believe that Portner would have foreseen in 1865 the exact location, extent and layout of his 1868 brewery, some of which would stand on land that he did not yet own. Thus, later cellars may have replaced or expanded the originals.

The mortgage of a brewery to a maltster was common at the time. As in Portner's case, malt and hops suppliers tended to be a brewer's largest creditor. Brewers often "became mortgaged to malt manufacturers for malt bills and had to relinquish their plants to them. In this way, several malt manufacturers became brewers, or had brewery workers man foreclosed plants for them." Robert Portner's creditor, Francis Denmead, although unknown today, is probably the most important figure in the history of brewing in the Chesapeake region.⁴ Denmead captured most of the barley malt market in eastern Maryland, northern Virginia and the District of Columbia soon after opening his City Malt House on West Falls Avenue in Baltimore in 1857. He acquired at least two Baltimore breweries, Schreier's and the Albion Brewery; Dewitt Ogden's Washington Brewery in the District of Columbia; and John Klein's Shooter's Hill Brewery in West End, just west of Alexandria, through trust sales or defaults on mortgage payments. He held mortgages on several other firms. While foreclosure was one way to make good a debt, Denmead's business was dependent on keeping breweries operational so that they would continue to buy malt. Thus, it was Denmead who rented Klein's old brewery to Robert Portner over the winter of 1865-1866, then leased it to John G. Cook before selling to Henry Englehardt. (*Evening Star*, August 5, 1857; Juenemann Collection; Heurich 1873-1874; Kelley 1965:174-175,200,399; H.S. Rich & Co. 1903:473; Walker, Dennee and Crane 1996; Fairfax County Deed Book F-4:188-191; District of Columbia Deed Book 755:92; Boyd's Directory Company 1877; Boyd's Directory Company 1878)

As Portner re-dedicated himself to brewing, he realized that he had to concentrate on exactly that, *brewing*. "I was a good businessman, but I knew very little about breweries. At that time brewing was regarded as a secret or an art." It is uncertain who was actually making the beer after Kaercher sold his share of the firm in 1865. Portner says only that it was difficult to get rid of his brewmaster when he endeavored to replace him in the fall of 1866. It is possible that Kaercher had stayed on as an employee, but he was busy running a nearby tavern. (Portner n.d.:13-14)

Although the details of this period are sketchy, it seems that Robert's brother Otto went into brewing on his own account. The primary evidence is from two stoneware beer bottles of the period, unearthed from archaeological sites in Alexandria in 1978 and 1993. Impressed on their shoulders are the words "OTTO PORTNER." It is difficult to accept that Otto would have had bottles manufactured for him unless he was producing or bottling beer or soda himself. In fact, the internal revenue assessment for July 1866 credits Otto for the production of four barrels of weiss beer, a wheat-based brew that was always bottled. The entry gives his address as 285 King Street, probably two doors west of the Portner & Company facility, across Fayette Street. This is corroborated by the Washington city directories of 1866 and 1867, which list as Alexandria brewers both "Robert Portner" at the northeast corner of King and Fayette, and "Portner & Winteroll" at 285 King. F. August Winteroll is an elusive figure only because for most of his

⁴ Denmead was a native of Baltimore, born in 1829. Until he opened his malt house, he was employed in railroad construction in the South, possibly as a construction engineer. His City Malt House had an annual capacity of 100,000 bushels, but its capacity was doubled with improvements in 1879. Denmead died in 1891, likely a misfortune for his debtors. His company reorganized with Denmead's son, Francis Jr., and many of the leading Baltimore brewers as stockholders. When this occurred, it is likely that they called in the longstanding debts of their more marginal customers. (Walker, Dennée and Crane 1996; H.S. Rich & Co. 1903)

life he instead went by the name August Calmes, having taken the surname of his stepfather, Joseph, during his Confederate war service with the “Dominion Rifles,” Company H, 17th Virginia Infantry.⁵ A baker by training, the twenty-year-old Winterroll/Calmes was detached for seven weeks of 1861 to an army bakery at Manassas. His next duty was hotter still; he was wounded at the Battle of Seven Pines on the Peninsula May 31, 1862. Thereafter absent until April 1863, he was finally recorded on the regimental books as a deserter. Perhaps to distance himself from his prior allegiance, he again assumed his original name when he returned to Alexandria, took the oath of allegiance to the United States, and started up his own confectionery on Cameron Street. Business being slack in mid 1864, Winterroll was one of the first to take advantage of the loosening of local restrictions on alcohol sales. He briefly moonlighted at the King Street beer garden of George H. Mellen before applying for a license to sell malt liquors in his own shop. Although born at Zweibrücken, Germany, there is no evidence that Winterroll/Calmes was any more a brewer than were Robert and Otto Portner upon *their* arrival in America. Nonetheless, Otto and August appear to have partnered at least between October 1866 and July 1867, although they cannot be definitively credited for more than about eighteen barrels’ production. Like Otto, Winterroll went on to operate a restaurant (with Louis Krafft on North Royal Street) but was ultimately more successful, later able to support a hobby as Alexandria’s most prominent yachtsman. (Portner n.d.:13-14; Alexandria Archaeology artifact collection, 44AX1 and 44AX35; Wallace 1990:106; Boyd 1866; Boyd 1867; Hopkins 1877; *Washington Post* August 16, 1908, February 13, 1924 and December 28, 1924; Provost Marshal)



The rarest “Portner” bottle of all. This tan stoneware bottle marked “OTTO PORTNER” presumably originated with the 1866-1867 Portner & Winterroll weiss-beer brewery. Given the small output of this firm, there may have been several hundred such bottles—but no more than that. There is one complete example known, this one in the Alexandria Archaeology collection.

Deprived of his former brewmaster and even the assistance of Otto temporarily, Robert Portner returned to the big city to hire the talent his enterprise now lacked. “I had made up my mind, I started out with new energy and went straight to New York to look for a master brewer.” And so

⁵ The name August Winterroll appears, however, in Alexandria’s 1896 real and personal property tax assessments.

began a period of experimentation. Portner not only tested batches of beer, but tested himself as he gradually learned the brewing trade and honed his ability to work with and supervise sometimes temperamental brewmasters. (Portner n.d.:14)

I finally found a man named Carl Wolters.... Although Wolters's knowledge was merely theoretical rather than practical, I preferred him to other applicants because he was an educated man.... It was in the fall that we neutralized the beer which was left in the cellars as well as possible with bicarbonate of soda. (This method was unknown to the old brewers.) (Portner n.d.:14)

It was perhaps just as well that old-time brewers lacked such knowledge. Needless to say, Portner's unsold beer was not fresh after spending months in the inadequately iced cellars. In fact, it was on its way to becoming vinegar when neutralized by the basic bicarbonate of soda. Although becoming interested in creating a superior product, Portner was not averse to cutting a few corners in the short run to keep his creditors at bay. This attitude was not necessarily uncommon among new brewers; Washington's Christian Heurich later wrote that after the establishment of his own small brewery in the 1870s, that he "didn't hold it as long as I do now—made it one week, sold it the next." In the long run, this could not pay in a competitive environment; by the end of the century, some Washington brewers would trumpet the six-month aging of their products. (Heurich n.d.:41; *Washington Post* March 13, 1898)

We sold part of this beer; but soon it was no longer possible since the other brewers already had fresh beer to sell. So we also started with the brewing. I assisted [Wolters] and had him show me everything. At night he gave me instructions in theory and we often studied until 10 p.m. We brewed together applying several methods; we also made ale. Finally, in November 1866, the beer was ready; but it was not yet good enough. The ale was not right either, but I was glad to sell three or four kegs of ale a day only to get some cash. Gradually the beer and the ale became better. (Portner n.d.:14)

Portner was unusual among his German-American contemporaries in that he was producing ale. He actually made three types, including a lighter "cream" ale and a porter, constituting about one third of his product. Because ale does not require especially cold temperatures for fermentation, it could be produced during more months of the year than lager. In addition, it could be fermented more rapidly and did not require as much expense for ice. For the same reasons, lager was still not well established in the South. Americans, although greater drinkers of spirits than of malt liquors, had also been accustomed to ale since colonial times. Ale could, however, be more costly in terms of ingredients as it is typically more heavily hopped than lager. (United States Census 1870b; Boyd 1867)

The business doubled; I sold five to six kegs a day and sometimes even eight to ten. I worked eagerly with [Wolters] and I had the opportunity to learn everything completely. I traveled through the state, got some customers, and many a day showed already sales of twelve to sixteen kegs of beer and ale together. On May 1,



A photograph taken shortly after the Civil War showing the saloon of Thomas Anthony Brewis on the 300 block of Cameron Street. The hanging sign reads "PHILADELPHIA ALE / Lager Beer." While Alexandria eventually lost the commercial competition with Baltimore and Washington, until the Civil War the city of Philadelphia was the yardstick by which the town judged itself. There are many newspaper advertisements, for instance, which compared Alexandria manufactures with those of the larger city and former national capital. Even in the mid nineteenth century, Philadelphia was still the source of many competing products such as beer. Alexandria Library Local History Special Collections, William Francis Smith Collection.

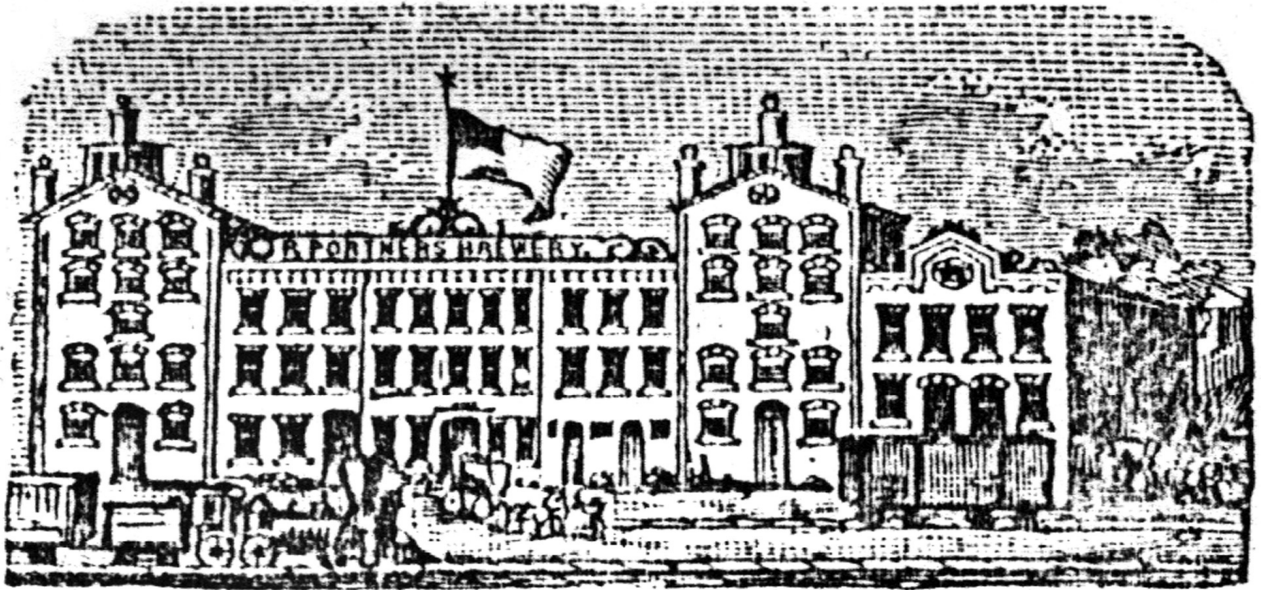
1867, the lager beer which we had stored in the cellars on Washington Street came out for sale. We had pumped out the old sour beer, partly making vinegar of it, partly pouring it away. The new beer was good but the sales were small. I had prepared eight hundred barrels, and sold about three hundred barrels to other brewers, this year showing a loss of \$2,000. But I had a few customers. Since Wolters left me at this time, I hired another brewer named Jacob Biehle from Richmond, where he had been assistant brewer with Yuengling.⁶ But now I was

⁶ Robert Portner later loaned Carl Wolters money to establish a brewery on Mascher Street in Philadelphia during the mid 1870s. Wolters then moved to North 11th Street. The business was re-organized in 1886 as the Prospect

able to supervise the business in every detail, which I did. Every day I went to the cellars and learned more. We brewed the beer the way Wolters had taught me, and the ale was also good. I believe that I sold twelve hundred barrels in 1866-67. By this time I also got some customers in Washington. I went on to work hard, once more sold some beer to other brewers and raised the sales to about seventeen to eighteen hundred barrels. (Portner n.d.:14)

Business looked promising enough and profitable enough that, with loans from his friends and probably brother Louis, Robert decided to finally realize his dream of constructing a new brewery on his property at the north end of town. (*The Western Brewer* June 1880)

In 1867 and 1868 the balance sheet showed no more losses; but the expenditures to transport the beer from the brewery to the cellars and back again were too high. I had to build the brewery on the same site where the cellars were located. Denmead raised my credit to \$16,000 (later to \$20,000), and in the summer of 1868 I started to build the new brewery. I made all the plans and the blue prints myself, moved all the old machines, etc., bought new ones, and when the year 1869 started, I had a very nice brewery. (Portner n.d.:14)



*The earliest known depiction of the Saint Asaph Street brewery, circa 1880.
Alexandria Library Local History Special Collections.*

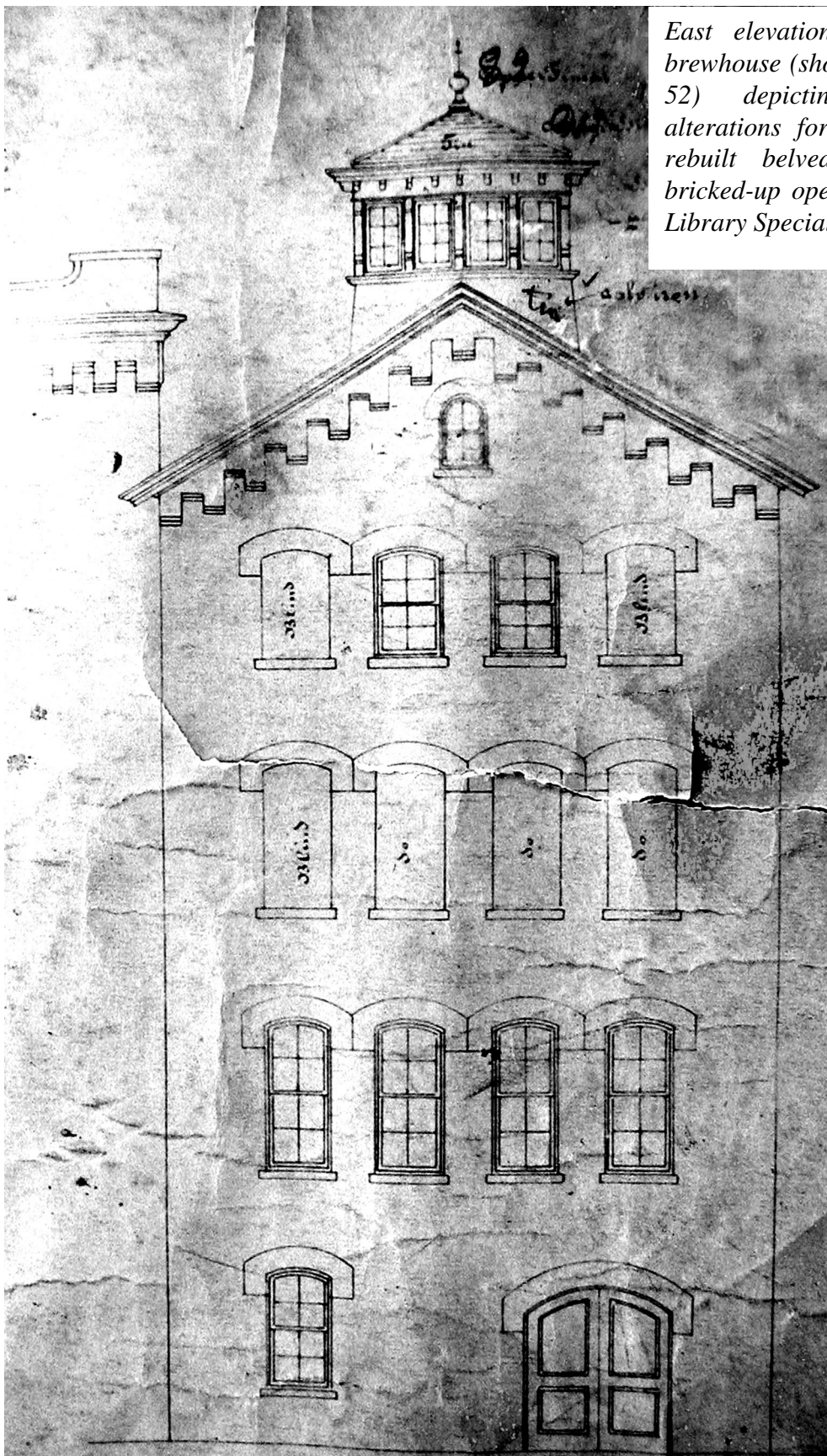
Brewing Company, with Wolters as vice-president and general manager and Karl Hutter as president. Hutter was possibly *the* Karl Hutter, a New York bottle closure manufacturer who supplied Portner with bottles during the 1880s. The Yuengling brewery or "James River Steam Brewery" was founded shortly after the war on the river just below the village of Rocketts, near Richmond. It was organized by three partners, John F. Betz, John Beyer and David G. Yuengling, Jr., son of the famous Pottsville, Pennsylvania brewer. (Van Wieren 1995:325,326; H.S. Rich & Co. 1903:402,458; Trow 1875 and 1876; Alexandria Archaeology Collection; Devine & Co. 1866)

Construction was well underway by mid July 1868, but it proceeded not without incident. In August, bricklayers Joseph and Henry Padgett were injured when an arch they were building collapsed. Advertisements make reference to the new brewery as early as October, but Portner retained the old one at least through January 1869. The roughly 60- by 160-foot plant was erected along the west side of what is now the 600 block of North Saint Asaph Street. Its load-bearing brick walls reached thicknesses of two-and-a-half feet. It was clearly Victorian, designed in the “Gothic Italianate” style, popular among German brewers of the period and not dissimilar to the vocabulary of the *circa* 1850 main buildings at the Virginia Theological Seminary a few miles away. The plant was divided into three three-story sections flanked by two four-story front-gabled end pieces, running north and south along the northern half of the block. Each section almost certainly connected to the others at each floor level to expedite the movement of ingredients. Brewing was conducted in the southernmost section, a four-story structure surmounted by a cupola and louvered window openings for cooling and ventilation. Its third story contained hoppers or storage bins for barley malt. The malt was elevated there by mechanical hoists, ready to drop through chutes into the mash tuns on the floor below. The second floor, the center of brewing activity, contained two copper brew kettles and at least one mash tun. The first floor housed the washroom. Attached behind the brewhouse was a structure initially containing an eight-horsepower steam engine and boiler, ventilated by a smokestack. The next section to the north held the coolers used to reduce the temperature of the freshly brewed wort. Because the coolers were located on the third floor (before the advent of artificial refrigeration), the wort had to be pumped upward from the brew kettles. The rest of the floor area was devoted to malt storage. The next, central section also contained hops and malt storage on at least the third floor.⁷ The brewery clearly possessed room for expansion and probably housed some of the functions, like cooperage or bottling, that were later spun off into subsidiary buildings. (*Alexandria Gazette* July 20, 1868, August 21, 1868, October 28, 1868 and January 18, 1869; United States Census 1870b; Sanborn Map Company 1885)

Although Portner does not divulge the cost of his plant, city tax records valued it at twice the worth of the earlier brewery, and this was undoubtedly an understatement. But Portner continued to enlarge and improve his facilities. (Portner n.d.:15; *Alexandria Real and Personal Property Assessments*) Unfortunately, his beer did not sell itself; there was plenty of competition from other brewers—in Alexandria, Washington, and other cities—and from other alcoholic beverages. At a time when most beer was sold in barrels to taverns, brewers had to market their product aggressively to consumers, and more importantly, to retailers. Like most German-American brewers of the period, Robert Portner decided to sell his own directly to the consumer through his own beer garden and restaurants (see Chapters 6, 8 and 11).

Such an extensive structure as the new brewery probably had an initial annual capacity of 5,000 to 10,000 barrels and required considerable production to pay off the capital investment. In the first full year of operation—or rather the first eight-month “year” of active brewing—the plant produced

⁷ This description of the interior is based mainly upon an 1885 Sanborn insurance map, the first map to clearly suggest an arrangement. By 1885, however, the arrangement would have been modified after Portner added air-conditioning and expanded the plant. Most of the northern sections were then devoted to aboveground cold fermentation and storage.



*East elevation of the original
brewhouse (shown at left on page
52) depicting circa 1894
alterations for grain storage—a
rebuilt belvedere and several
bricked-up openings. Alexandria
Library Special Collections.*

BEST FEED FOR COWS, &c., &c.

FRESH GRAINS,
at the New Brewery, every day.

Price 15c per bushel.

cc 28—1w

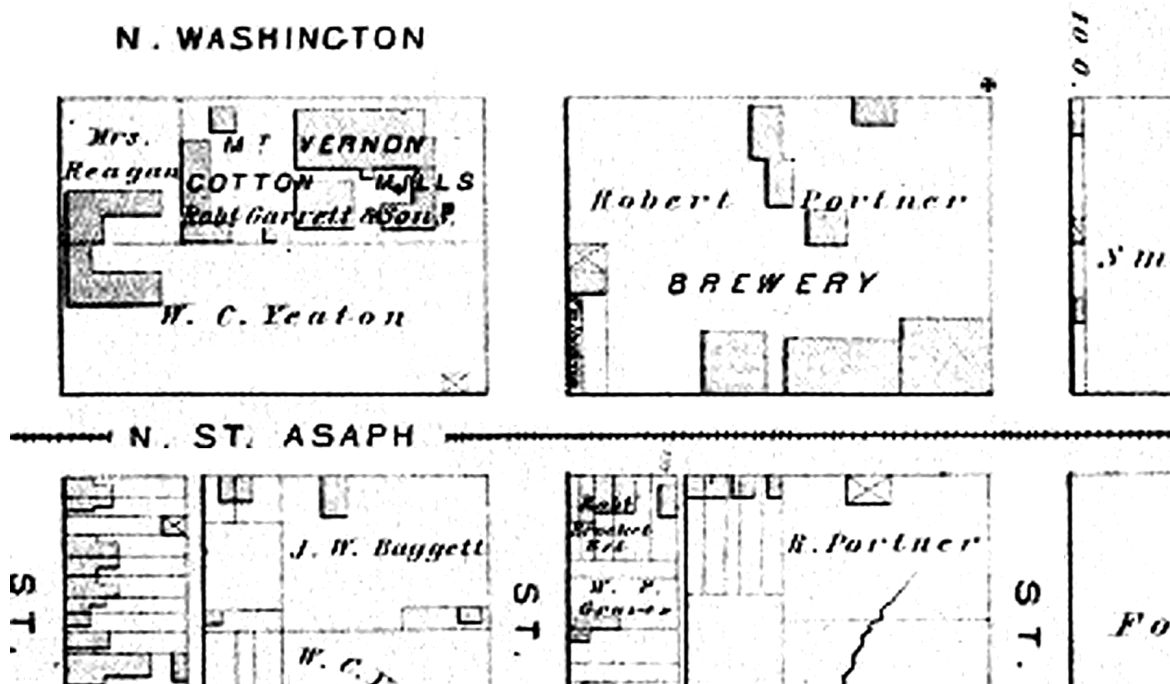
ROBERT PORTNER.

*Breweries and distilleries
commonly sold spent and
surplus grains for cattle and
pig feed. They still do.*

1,200 barrels of lager and 600 barrels of ale, at a price of \$10 per barrel. Costs included \$2,900 wages for the six employees, \$6,400 for 4,000 bushels of malt, \$1,230 for 3,000 pounds of hops, and \$333 for fuel, i.e., coal and wood for the steam engine and brew kettles. The whole represented a net profit of \$7,137 which, of course, was applied to Portner's earnings, his debt payments, and further investment in the business, although not necessarily in that order. (United States Census 1870b)

[Total] sales amounted to about twenty-five hundred barrels [in 1870] and increased to thirty-six hundred barrels the following year. They brought a profit of about five to six thousand dollars. Each year I made a trip to see the progress in other breweries. I started to build an [insulated] ice [storage] house, the first in this part of the country; it was partly finished by spring 1871 and greatly improved the beer sales. In the winter of 1870-71, I had Peter Wolters, Carl's [younger] brother, as a master brewer. He was a good brewer and a hard worker, but had a bad character. The beer he brewed was so good that we became also known in Washington, where I got new customers. I supervised the brewery myself, kept the books, engaged new [customers], and visited old customers. In the office I had the help of a young man. In April 1871, I discharged Wolters and hired a young man named [Edward] Fielmayer, who was a barkeeper in Washington, but he was the son of a brewer from Philadelphia. He stayed with me until the fall of 1871, and then returned to his parents.⁸ On account of the ice house, the business increased enormously. I sold very much, but could not deliver all that was ordered. I made much money, paid off my old debts, and kept on enlarging the ice house. My main helpers in the brewery were some very good and able Negroes, one being an engineer and the other an assistant brewer. (The latter is still with the brewery [i.e., circa 1890].) Even if I had to change master brewers now, it was not so important since the workmen knew

⁸ Fielmeyer (or Fielmayer or Fielemeyer) was the son of Joseph Fielmeyer, who owned a brewery at 2425 North Broad Street in Philadelphia. Edward officially took over management of his father's brewery in the spring of 1880. (Costa 1878; *The Western Brewer* June 1880; Van Wieren 1995:329)



Above: A site plan of the Saint Asaph Street brewery after eight or nine years, plus some of the surrounding blocks into which it would expand. From the G.M. Hopkins map of Alexandria, 1877.

Left: 319 Cameron Street, Alexandria, opposite City Hall and the site of Otto Portner's 1877-1880 saloon, likely known as the Tivoli Restaurant.

their duties well, and I myself could supervise everything. During the fall of 1871, Paul Muhlhauser came to the brewery as master brewer. He was recommended by Mr. Schwarz, who now owns the brewer school in New York. (Portner n.d.:15)

Muhlhauser would remain as brewmaster for several years, then leave to start his own Baltimore brewery, and return again as brewmaster and plant superintendent until his death in 1890. Next to Portner, he would have the greatest influence on the success of the enterprise until that time. In 1871 he was one of at least eight known regular, full-time employees. It is unfortunate that Portner does not mention the names of his two African American workers, but he was probably referring to Ben and James (or John) Washington, two native Virginians. Carl Portner had returned to New York, kept a bar, and died in 1873. Louis Portner visited Alexandria for a time in 1869, perhaps to see how his investment—i.e., his loan to his younger brother toward the new brewery—was performing. Like father Heinrich Portner, Louis apparently became a court official and election inspector in New York by 1870. Like Robert, he became involved in local politics during the war. He died shortly before 1880. (*Alexandria Gazette* August 21, 1890; United States Census 1870b; Boyd 1870; United States Census 1900b; Portner n.d.:4; Alexandria Real and Personal Property Assessments; United States Census 1870c; Trow City Directory Co. 1880; Committee of One Hundred on Democratic Re-organization 1881; *New York Times* October 7, 1862 and June 10, 1870)

Otto Portner remained in Alexandria and maintained his connection with his older brother, although not always as an employee of the brewery. He boarded in the King Street building in which Robert briefly ran a restaurant, and he likely continued to assist Robert, but he also partnered with Henry Herbner running a beer garden next to the brewery in 1867. More important, in 1869 Otto was appointed the local “Internal Revenue Storekeeper,” an agent for the government responsible for examining the books and the premises of breweries, distilleries, tobacco factories, etc. in order to ensure that the proper excise taxes were being paid. In other words, Otto was responsible for auditing Robert’s taxes, an obvious conflict of interest, but not unheard of within a federal bureaucracy still ruled by the spoils system. He was transferred to Staunton, Virginia in 1870 but returned to Robert’s employ as bookkeeper and shipping clerk at the brewery’s first branch depot in Washington from 1876 until 1880 or 1881. At the same time, he and a man named Faber were granted licenses to operate a saloon at 71 (now 319) Cameron Street in Alexandria.⁹ This may have been an early example of a brewery indirectly controlling retail outlets (see Chapter 11). (Boyd 1870; Boyd 1871; United States Census 1870b; Estee 1863; National Archives and Records Administration, *Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Internal Revenue Service* n.d.:8,25; *Alexandria Gazette* September 9, 1868, June 11, 1869 and February 3, 1870; J.H. Chataigne 1876; Boyd’s Directory Co. 1877; Boyd’s Directory Co. 1879; Boyd’s Directory Co. 1880; Alexandria Corporation Court Minute Book 4:15,200,370,417,419)

⁹ Not a great deal is known about Otto’s later life. He apparently remained in Alexandria until at least 1885, when he traveled to Germany. He is known to have been a resident of Strasburg, Virginia by the 1890s. There, he was unemployed and a boarder with the Eberly family in June 1900. A turn-of-the-century book mentions him in passing as “an educated German.” Otto was the only brother to survive Robert, as he was remembered in the latter’s will, but he outlived Robert by only ten weeks. (*Washington Post* May 23, 1885, September 26, 1895 and August 9, 1906; Wayland 1907:100; United States Census 1900b)

By the early 1870s, the prospects for the Robert Portner Brewery had completely reversed from their nadir five years earlier. The property was now worth three times the value of the old King Street brewery and included much of the southern half of the block along Washington and Pendleton Streets, purchased in 1872.¹⁰ The business outdistanced the other two remaining Alexandria breweries. In 1869-1870 Martin's ale brewery, comparable to Portner's in terms of capital investment, was expending proportionately more on inputs but producing much less. And Henry Englehardt, a successor of John Klein and John G. Cook at the Shooter's Hill Brewery in West End, apparently never produced even 500 barrels annually over the period 1872 to 1892. With his own sales way up, Portner invested in a new, more powerful steam engine and in a third delivery wagon, "one of the handsomest vehicles of the kind ever seen." By the end of 1872 he had paid off all his debts and began to build a new house on the brewery property. The boss living so near his industrial plant may seem unusual to us today, but it was common for an era of limited transportation and an indication of Portner's total involvement with the brewery during this period. He could also afford a certain *largesse* toward his growing work force; on Christmas 1874, his men, "who had been presented by the proprietor... with hats and jackets and turkeys, marched in procession through some of the streets..." Having carved out a small beer market in Washington, the brewer now made plans to expand that market by establishing his first rail-accessible distribution depot in that city. He also began diversifying his business interests into other fields (see Chapters 6 and 12). (Alexandria Real and Personal Property Assessments; *Alexandria Gazette* April 26, 1872, March 31, 1873 and December 26, 1874; *Evening Star* May 22, 1873; Alexandria Circuit Court Deed Books 3:65 and 3:175; Portner n.d.:16; United States Census 1870b; Walker, Dennee and Crane 1996)

¹⁰ The parcel had been the site of "Factory Row," worker housing for the nearby 1847 Mount Vernon Cotton Factory. Factory Row burned down in the winter of 1871-1872. (*Alexandria Gazette* April 26, 1872)

**A Partial List of Employees of the Robert Portner Brewery, 1865-1882
(aka Portner's Brewery, the Alexandria Brewery, Vienna Brewery or Tivoli Brewery)**

Sources: United States Census, 1870 and 1880; Robert Portner's memoirs; Alexandria Circuit Court marriage records; city directories; and newspapers

Name	Occupation	Approx. dates of employment	Date of birth	Place of birth
Allen, Thomas	fireman	1881		
Ashby, Carroll	bottling manager	1882-		
Baertsch, John		1880-1904		
Baier [Beyer], George	"brewer"	1880-1881	1852	Bavaria
Beale, Nathaniel	laborer	1880	1851	Virginia
Bealley [Biehle], John		1870	1827	Baden
Bell, Robert Jr.	depot superintendent, Norfolk, VA	1876-1880		
Bernhard, Andrew Jr.		1880-1881		
Bernhardt	driver	-1878		
Biehle, Jacob	brewmaster	1867-1871		
Bontz, George	carpenter and "brewer"	1881	1849	Virginia
Carrington, Henry	laborer	1880	1835	Virginia (a)
Carroll, Francis E.		1880	1860	Virginia (i)
Coles, John		1880-1907?	1843	Virginia
Eils, Bette Edward J.	clerk	1862-1866	1841	Germany
Ewald, Leo J.	watchman	1882-1907	1846	Bavaria
Fielmeyer, Edward	brewmaster	1871		Pennsylvania (g)
Frissius, Christian	clerk; depot manager, Goldsboro, NC	1881-1882; 1882-		
Gaither, Jerry	"hand"	1873	1843	Maryland
Giles, Thomas H.	driver, Lynchburg, VA; depot agent, Lynchburg; collector/driver, Augusta, GA	1879-1881 and 1883-1886; 1881-1883; 1883-1886		
Herbort, Charles Gustave	depot superintendent, Lynchburg, VA; depot superintendent Augusta, GA	1879-1881; 1881-1882	1848	Germany
Jones, Samuel	worker	1880	1846	Virginia
Kell, Arthur	bottler	1880		
Kohout, John	brewmaster/foreman	1878-1882	1845	Bohemia
Lyles, Samuel	cooper	1880-1903	1829	Virginia

Name	Occupation	Approx. dates of employment	Date of birth	Place of birth
Mahler, Wilhelm		1882		
Martin, James	driver	1882		
Mason, James “Sandy”	boiler cleaner	1878-1888	1857	Virginia (a)
Muhlhauser, Paul	brewmaster	1871-1878	1850	Wurtemberg
Oberholzer, Louis	stableman	1880-1882	1836	Switzerland
Padgett, Eugene B.	telegraph operator	1880		
Portner, Otto	clerk; bookkeeper, Washington, DC	1865-1868; 1875-1880	1839	Westphalia
Robertson, Frank	driver	-1881		
Scherr, Louis	summer garden superintendent	1876		
Schwarz, M.	traveling agent	1881		
Smith, Burnett H.	agent	1880	1854	Virginia
Speis, Boniface	“brewer”	1871		
Stoecker, Henry	laborer	1875-1905		Germany
Strangmann, Carl	shipping clerk; traveling agent	1875-1882; 1882-	1860	Westphalia
Summers, Bartholomew R.	depot agent, Norfolk, VA	1880-1883		
Telak, Charles		1881		
Valaer, Christian	clerk; bottling manager	1880-1882; 1882-190?	1862	Switzerland
Wallace, Thomas E.	depot manager, Augusta, GA	1882-1884		
Washington, Benjamin	engineer?	1870	1845	Virginia
Washington, J[ames?]	assistant brewer?	1870-1890	1831	Virginia
Weber, Hans		1880-1881		
Weber, John	clerk	1880	1856	Prussia
Welch, John Paul	“brewer”	1880	1829	Bavaria
West, Andrew	“brewer”	1880	1860	Virginia (g)
Wolters, Carl	brewmaster	1866-1867	1830	Prussia
Wolters, Peter	brewmaster	1870-1871	1842	Prussia
Zwirngibel, Joseph	“brewer”	1881		